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THE PROFESSIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF APPOINTMENTS BY TEACHERS' AGENCIES¹

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A very impressive contrast can be drawn between the mode of appointing teachers in the United States and the mode of appointing teachers in Germany and France. We may say of the teachers of those older civilizations that they are civil service appointees. No one can enter the teaching profession unless he has a grade of training which is approved by the public authorities. Once he is admitted to the ranks of the teaching profession he becomes a public servant and it is regarded as the duty of the government to see to it, first, that there is an adequate supply of teachers for the places, and secondly, that each teacher is protected in his rights to a position and an ultimate pension for life.

On this side of the water the situation is very different. In the first place, our state governments do not assume full responsibility for an adequate supply of teachers. We face every year the fact that there are not enough graduates from our public and private normal schools to fill the schools that must have teachers. Furthermore, the state takes still less responsibility for the individual teacher. In many of our states there is no pension system, and a state system of providing places for teachers is very rare and by no means effective.

Some beginnings are made on the negative side of state control of these matters. No one is allowed to secure a teaching position unless public authorities issue a certificate. In the better states the central state authorities hold the exclusive power of certification, while in the older and in the less-organized states the county authorities or the local authorities issue the certificates. Whatever the authority, it is to be noted that all these activities of certifica-

¹ Presented before the National Association of Teachers' Agencies on February 23, 1916.

tion are negative. Public officials do not assume responsibility for the placing of teachers.

Because of the lack of public control of the appointment of teachers, private agencies have arisen to help candidates find positions. The teachers' agency is, first of all, a vender of information. The teacher without a position can find out through a teachers' agency where there are vacancies; and a superintendent who has to have a teacher, especially if he has to have a teacher of a certain particular type and on a given date, can turn to a teachers' agency to find out about available candidates. If the state were completely organized to deal with the problem of locating teachers, the private agencies which sell information about positions and candidates would have no place.

Secondly, the teachers' agency often acts for society as a selecting agency, putting a professionally trained teacher where his or her service will be most valuable. Many of the agencies are under the guidance of experienced schoolmen who have had an opportunity to judge of teachers' qualifications and their relations to positions. A teachers' agency, when guided by a man of judgment, may thus render a very great public service.

On the other hand, when a teachers' agency is not guided by motives of public service, it can do great harm by placing poorly qualified candidates in positions which they ought not to secure. The pull is often very strong to secure a commission, even if the public suffers.

At this point it is proper to inject a remark which reviews the well-known facts with regard to teachers' appointments. Unfortunately compensation does not increase in exact proportion to training and efficiency. The many investigations which have been made of teachers' salaries, both in particular school systems and in the country at large, go to make it clear that a teacher's salary is likely to advance with the teacher's age and experience, but not necessarily with the teacher's efficiency. Evidently our school system is, in this respect, unscientific and unorganized. If there were precise means of determining the qualifications of a candidate so that a superintendent could be sure that he was selecting a candidate of high quality, it would be fair to make the demand that

the salary be commensurate with the training and ability of the teacher. Since there seems to be no method at the present time of determining accurately a teacher's qualifications, the compensation received by the teacher is, in large measure, a chance. In some cases the candidate falls into a position where his ability is recognized and the compensation seems to be adequate. In other cases he is unable to move because his range of information is so slight that he does not know of other positions to which he might go. At all events, elements of the situation wholly outside of his ability to teach often operate to keep him in a position in which salary and scope of influence are altogether out of keeping with his ability.

In addition to these mere accidents there is the definite effort on the part of many teachers and their organizations to prevent the adoption in cities or in the country at large of a merit system. The attitude of these organizations is in part justified by the fact that it is extremely difficult to set up a merit system which shall be absolutely just to all candidates. If we knew how to determine the excellence of one candidate as over against another, the merit system might free itself of the charges now often made that its adjustments are not equitable and not helpful to the organization of the system as a whole. Whatever the difficulties in administering the merit system, the progress of this system throughout the country is certainly very slow, again attesting the skepticism of school officers and school teachers with regard to the possibilities of any scientific method of determining wages and promotions.

This uncertainty about advancement makes the teaching profession a restless body of adventurers. The private agency comes in with tempting offers of change, and the teacher takes a chance, hoping to get one of those fortuitous advances which accident sometimes presents to the lucky candidate.

In a situation as chaotic as this which we have been reviewing, the influence of any agency which operates to sell information and to pass judgments on positions becomes very large. A teachers' agency which is well known to superintendents and school officers undoubtedly does become a very definite factor in adjusting the professional relations within the schools. It would not be right to hold the teachers' agency responsible for the present chaos, but, in

view of the large influence which this agency exercises, it is legitimate to ask that it co-operate in improving the situation and eliminating unprofessional conditions as fast as possible.

The question which I should like to raise as pointedly as I may is the question whether the influence of the teachers' agency is exercised in a professional way. For example, let me ask regarding the amount of compensation which the teachers' agency claims for the service which it renders. The agency ought to have a compensation which is commensurate with the service which it has rendered, and it should extract this compensation from the party most fully served.

In this connection it is interesting to note that the whole payment is made by the teacher. The school system evidently is not regarded as served by the agency. When one considers that great business concerns set up their own employment agencies at great cost, one is led to question the equity of the present arrangement.

Secondly, the question arises whether the clients of the agencies pay a just fee. At present it seems that the fee is often excessive. I am well aware that the cases which are most likely to come to the surface are those cases in which there has been maladjustment of some sort. I think the statement can hardly be questioned that the only way in which teachers' agencies will ever free themselves from these charges that arise in individual cases will be through the adoption of a system of publicity which heretofore has never been practiced by teachers' agencies.

Let the teachers' agency make a public report, setting forth quite explicitly the cases in which it has recommended candidates. Let the teachers' agency set down for public consumption a statement of its financial transactions for the year. Teachers who wish to register in the agency will in this way be able to inform themselves of the exact compensation which the agency received for its labors, and they will be able to judge whether they as teachers are paying more or less for the service than is just. I venture to make the prophecy that some day a teachers' agency will undertake the publication of these facts with regard to its activities and that the agency which first adopts this system of publicity will become the leading agency in the United States, for teachers will be prepared

to commit their candidacy to the hands of an institution that is brave enough to publish its transactions with the same degree of confidence that they now exhibit in life insurance agencies and banks. Indeed, I venture to carry the analogy a step farther. I believe in legislation which will compel this publicity in teachers' agencies just as the law now compels publicity in the activities of insurance companies and banks.

Until teachers' agencies are willing to come out into the open and behave as public institutions, there will be all sorts of skepticism with regard to their transactions.

There are unfortunately legitimate grounds for the kinds of criticism that are sometimes heard. I am going to venture to present to you two of the general criticisms that lead the ordinary candidate to believe that a teachers' agency is unprofessional. In the first place, we are told that it is a common practice among teachers' agencies to move several teachers when they have a single opening. We have been told, and with a fair amount of evidence, that when a teachers' agency gets knowledge of a position that pays \$1,600 a year that agency proceeds to move into the \$1,600 position a person registered on its books who is now receiving a salary of \$1,400. It then moves into the \$1,400 position someone who is receiving a salary of \$1,200, and so on down the list until it reaches the lowest paid candidate whom it can consider for any appointment. This is, perhaps, good business, but it is a very doubtful policy from the point of view of the school system. There are enough motives at the present time operating in our American schools to keep the teaching body on the move. When we have the teachers of a great state reported to us as more than one-third new in their positions in a given year, it is certainly time for the teaching profession to consider seriously whether there is not some way of preventing the operation of those tendencies which lead to the migration within the schools. Any teachers' agency which contributes largely to a further migration of teachers within our schools ought to be called strictly to task, and that promptly. It is not unjust to charge that the operations of teachers' agencies are unprofessional if for mere financial gain these agencies push teachers along and readjust them with trivial increases in salary and with

very great probabilities of disadvantage both to the candidate and to the system.

In the second place, one hears from time to time statements of the enforcement of claims of teachers' agencies on candidates who are unwittingly caught in a form of contract which is of very doubtful equity. I have known cases among my students where I finally offered to help the student defend himself against unreasonable demands. I hardly know what to recommend in a case of this sort. I am sure that there ought to be ultimately some possibility of adjusting matters of this type on a professional basis. I believe that the agency that would develop a system of publicity could also be relied upon to develop a system of arbitration through some professional teaching body. I understand that this Association has a code of ethics and has made pronouncements on the matter of adjusting claims. There ought to be, I believe, a professional committee to which claims might be referred. Such a committee should be announced on every contract and application blank.

I believe that ultimately the teachers' agencies will be absorbed into state departments of education or into state teachers' associations. It seems to me perfectly clear that a state teachers' association ought to have a record of its own members of exactly the type that is now in the hands of the teachers' agency. I believe that a competent secretary of such a teachers' association could render in a large public way the service that is now rendered by the head of a private agency. Such a public institution as this could be made to pay a fair profit and could at the same time be saved from all of the dangers of excessive profit. It could also be made to serve many purposes other than that of merely appointing teachers. At the present time teachers are very loosely united in their state organizations, and they are unable to secure proper legislation because there is no complete register of teachers. Furthermore, there is no possible way of getting in this country a full account of the average qualifications of teachers in our schools, because even the state authorities are not supplied in many cases with this information. As a by-product of the general register of the teachers of a state, much valuable information would become available—enough, indeed, to justify one in entering upon a campaign to secure

the organization of a state teachers' agency. If teachers took in hand their own appointments to positions through some co-operative organization of the type suggested, it would promote professional interests enormously and would lead to a consideration of professional ethics in a way in which the ordinary teacher now hardly thinks of professional relations.

What is being asked for in all of these suggestions is a control of the situation that is commensurate with the influence which is exercised by any agency which places teachers. Teachers' agencies have grown out of a chaotic situation and have acquired a power which cannot be overlooked. The question that I am trying to raise is the question of the ethical and professional use of this influence. Is there at the present time a sufficient safeguard in the mere competition between various teachers' agencies that the behavior of these agencies will always be for the interests of the profession? I question, to repeat the analogy which I have already used, whether a teachers' agency has a right to operate as a private agency any more than an insurance company has a right to operate as a private agency. Or, again, if our banks need inspecting, then, in my judgment, our teachers' agencies also need to be inspected. I prophesy that the time will come when state legislation or state teachers' associations will define or take over the activities of these agencies so that they will become public institutions in every sense of the word. I believe that the stronger agencies would do themselves a great service by anticipating the appearance of legislation of a restrictive type and organizing themselves in such a way as to forestall all criticisms.